

HOW BARRIER-FREE TOLLS CAN SAVE CONNECTICUT

Slow down, stop, drop a token. Slow down, stop, drop a token.

When you think of tolls, you probably remember those awful booths that used to turn Connecticut highway travel into a stop-and-go nightmare (and, sometimes, a tragic inferno).

Push those images out of your mind. Connecticut banished its last toll booth in 1989, and we will never see them here again.

But today's technology does allow us to create all-electronic tolling (AET). It's a new kind of system that doesn't even require you to slow down as you pass.

By installing booth-free, non-stop tolling in the right places, we could net more than \$1 billion dollars a year for transportation and, just as important, begin to unclog our most crowded highways.

This idea comes from the state's Transportation Strategy Board. They conducted a two-year, \$1 million study, which was presented in February. The 500-page final report examined eight possible tolling scenarios, from tolling all limited-access roads to creating special toll lanes on otherwise free highways.

And what happened to the study? What always happens: Nothing. The plan is to spend the next several years talking and thinking about it. And it's not going anywhere for at least the next year—Governor Rell is opposed to reinstituting tolls.

I support tolling for two reasons, both of which will attract new businesses to Connecticut—and with them, jobs:

Tolls will relieve congestion

Traffic through the Stamford-Bridgeport corridor is projected to increase to the point that, by 2030, it will resemble the infinite-parking-lot highways of Los Angeles today. If you were a CEO, would you want to relocate your business to an area like that? By charging higher tolls during peak hours, we will move commuters to alternative schedules and public transportation.

Tolls will fund transportation

Our current budgets for roads and transit are underfunded, and in this economy, it will only grow worse. Revenue from tolls will let us add the capacity we need—most importantly, Connecticut's rails. Improved commuter train service (including the proposed link between New Haven,

Hartford and Springfield, Mass.) will foster business growth along our transportation corridors and protect our rural areas from sprawl.

There is another reason I support tolls: fairness. When we drive the New York Thruway or Massachusetts Turnpike, we're tossing our money into the coffers of those border states. Yet when cars and trucks cross into Connecticut, we foot the bill. Why shouldn't they pony up here as we do there?

Tolls will improve our quality of life and bring jobs to Connecticut. But, to be honest, some obstacles remain before we can implement them.

First is the federal government's stated goal of keeping the interstates toll-free. They withhold highway dollars from states that impose them. However, exemptions are available for tolling that serves other federal aims, such as reducing congestion and improving transit. We should pursue these.

Nobody likes to pay tolls. But with unsustainable congestion looming, and the ongoing need to attract jobs and businesses, a smart approach to tolling is the answer Connecticut is looking for.

Sincerely yours,

Rudy Marconi
First Selectman
Town of Ridgefield